THE SEVEN OFT-REPEATED VERSES

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INTRODUCTION

1. *In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.*
2. *Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds;*
3. *The Most Gracious, Most Merciful.*
4. *Master of the Day of Judgment.*
5. *You alone we worship and from You alone we seek help.*
6. *Guide us to the straight way,*
7. *The way of those on whom you have bestowed Your grace, not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray.*

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful, Master of the Day of Judgment. And may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon His servant and Messenger – our Prophet Muhammad – and upon all of his family and Companions.

A Muslim reads this magnificent chapter of the *Qur'ân* many times throughout the day with every unit of prayer that he or she performs. This is because the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "There is no prayer without the opening chapter of the Book."[1] The commentators of this *hadîth* explain to us that this chapter must be read in every unit of the formal prayers. This shows just how important and esteemed this chapter is. All Muslims – not to mention the students of knowledge among them – should contemplate the meanings found within it, because Allah chose it from among all the chapters and verses of the *Qur'ân* for us to repeat in our prayers, and He did so from His divine wisdom.

THE MANY TITLES OF THIS CHAPTER

This chapter has numerous titles, which is another indication of how important it is.

It is called *The Opening* (*al-Fâtihah*).[2] The Prophet (peace be upon him) called it "*The Opening of the Book*." The reason for this is that it is the first chapter that one reads when one opens the *Qur'ân*, though it was not the first chapter to be revealed.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) also called it *The Mother of the Qur'ân* (*Umm al-Qur'ân*).[3] The reason for this – and Allah knows best – is that it contains within it the general meaning of the *Qur'ân*. It embraces all the principles and major themes that the *Qur'ân* addresses.

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[1] Bukhârî (714) and Muslim (595).
[2] *ibid*.
[3] Bukhârî (4335): The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "The Mother of the Book: they are the Seven Oft-Repeated Verses and the Glorious Recital."

It is called *The Seven Oft-Repeated Verses* (*al-Sab` al-Mathânî*), because its seven verses are read over and over. Another way that these verses are repeated is through the repetition of their general meanings throughout the *Qur'ân*.

It is called *The Glorious Recital* (*al-Qur'ân al-`Azîm*). The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "They are the Seven Oft-Repeated Verses and the Glorious Recital that I have been given."[4]

It is *The Chapter of Praise* (*Sûrah al-Hamd*), because it begins by praising Allah: "*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds*."

Allah even refers to it as *The Prayer* (*al-Salâh*). This comes in a *hadîth qudsî* (a *hadîth* where the Prophet relates the words of his Lord) where Allah says:

"I have split *The Prayer* into two parts, one for me and one for My servant, and My servant will have what he asks for. When the servant says: *Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds*, I say: 'My servant has praised Me.' When he says: *The Most Gracious, Most Merciful*, I say: 'My servant has extolled Me.' When he says *Master of the Day of Judgment*, I say: 'My servant has glorified Me' or 'My servant has deferred to Me.' When he says: *You alone we worship and from You alone we seek help*, I say: 'This is between Me and My servant, and my servant will have what he asks for.' When he says: *Guide us to the straight way, The way of those on whom you have bestowed Your grace, not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray*, I say: 'This is for My servant, and My servant will have what he asks for."[5]

Allah calls it *The Prayer*. One reason for this is that the chapter is part remembrance and part supplication. It contains a supplication in utmost devotion for the greatest thing that can be asked for – divine guidance. This is contained in the verse: "*Guide us to the straight way*." In this manner, the chapter is named for part of what it contains, since supplication is called prayer in the Arabic language.

Allah, elsewhere in the *Qur'ân*, says: "Verily your prayers are a source of security for them." [*Sûrah al-Tawbah*: 103] He is here referring to supplications for them.

This usage is also found in the following verses of classical poetry penned by al-A`shâ:

My daughter says when I am about to depart,
"O Lord, keep away from my father all hardships and ailments."

May you have all that you have prayed for me,
And sleep…for truly this man is lying down on his side.

[4] Bukhârî (4114).
[5] Muslim (598).

The verse: '*May you have all that you have prayed for me*' means 'you have from my supplications the same as you have offered for me in yours.' The word prayer was used in the verse to mean supplication.

There is another possible reason why this chapter of the *Qur'â*n is called *The Prayer*, and that is that the formal prescribed prayers are not valid unless it is recited within them. As mentioned before, reciting this chapter is a fundamental part of the prescribed prayer.

This chapter of the *Qur'ân* has other titles as well, all of which indicate its lofty status and the esteem in which it is held. These names also show how important it is to reflect upon this chapter and to give it ample consideration. A clear indication of it status is the fact that there is scarcely a Muslim in the world who has not committed it to memory. Even when a person first accepts Islam and gives the testimony of faith, the first thing that he or she memorizes is this opening chapter - the *Fâtihah*. This is so he or she can perform the prescribed prayers. If a person recites only this chapter in prayer, it is sufficient for the prayer to be valid. Reciting more is an optional act; it is preferred, but it is not obligatory.

Due to its importance, we shall investigate and study the verses of the *Fâtihah*, breaking our study into five sections. We shall explain the meanings of these verses and we ask Allah to grant us success in doing so.

PART ONE
INVESTIGATING ALLAH'S STATEMENT:
"In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful"

Scholars differ as to whether or not these words count as a verse of the *Fâtihah* or even if they are a verse of the *Qur'ân*, while some scholars consider them to be a verse of every chapter of the *Qur'ân*. I will not go into this issue here – it is a point of Islamic Law – but I will deal with it as part of my lessons on the book *Bulûgh al-Marâm*, Allah willing.

What is important to note is that every chapter of the *Qur'an* begins with the words: "*In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful*." In the *Fâtihah*, moreover, they are followed by: "*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds; The Most Gracious, Most Merciful*", so the two lofty attributes of Allah get repeated. In the *Fâtihah*, five of Allah's names are mentioned. They are: Allah, al-Rabb (the Lord), al-Rahmân (the Most Gracious), al-Rahîm (the Most Merciful) and al-Mâlik (the Master).

? Allah

This is Allah's greatest name.[6] All of his other names come after it. No one or nothing else shares this name with Him. No one else has ever been called by this name.

One meaning implicit in the name Allah is that the hearts of humanity deify and worship Him – they yearn for and desire meeting Him and seeing Him. They take comfort in

[6] This is the opinion of one group of scholars.

remembering Him. He is Allah to Whom all hearts turn in reverent devotion and longing, to the extent that a Muslim – expressing the words of Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) – calls out to Allah saying: "I ask you the pleasure of gazing upon Your noble face out of longing to meet with You…"

Another meaning implied by the noble name Allah is that He is beyond human comprehension. Human knowledge can never comprehend Him. Nothing of His nature or of His essence can be known except what He reveals to us in His Book or on the tongue of His Messenger (peace be upon him). The mind can never know how His essence truly is. The mind will always fail to comprehend it and fall into bewilderment. The rational faculties of mankind get befuddled when contemplating some of what He has created within the heavens and in the land and sea. So how can they ever hope to comprehend Allah? The mind, from absolute exhaustion, must abandon any attempt of grasping His essence. This is why Allah says: "They will never comprehend Him with their knowledge." [*Sûrah TâHâ*: 110]

In the *hadîth* where Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) describes the intercession that Allah will grant him on the Day of Resurrection, he says: "I will seek permission from my Lord and he will grant it to me. Then He will inspire me with words of praise that I now have no knowledge of and I will praise Him with them and fall down before Him prostrate."

In this *hadîth*, the Prophet (peace be upon him) informs us that Allah will teach him words of praise that he did not know before that time. This means that Allah will grant him knowledge of Himself that he had never possessed before.

Another meaning implicit in the name Allah is the concept that He is the deity Who has the exclusive right to be worshipped. This is why the name Allah is the only one mentioned in the testimony of faith. A believer must testify: "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah" and cannot say instead: "I bear witness that there is no God but the Gracious" or "the Merciful", though "the Gracious" and "the Merciful" are definitely among His names. He must only use the proper name Allah that is the ultimate source for all the other names. When he says: "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah" he professes that there is no true object of worship in existence except for Allah. There are many other things that people take as objects of worship, but they are all false. Allah says: "This is because Allah is the Truth and what they call on besides Him is falsehood." [*Sûrah al-Hajj*: 62]

? al-Rabb (The Lord)

He is the Lord of All the Worlds, the Lord of everything in existence. He created everything and has absolute power over it. Nothing can escape from His Lordship, and everyone in the heavens and on Earth is His servant. They are in His grasp and under His authority.

? al-Rahmân (the Most Gracious) and al-Rahîm (the Most Merciful)

The name al-Rahmân, like the name Allah, is used only for Allah. No one else may be called by this name. Allah and al-Rahmân are His exclusive names. This is why Allah says: "Call upon Allah or call upon al-Rahmân; by whichever name you call upon Him, to Him belong the most excellent names." [*Sûrah al-Isrâ'*: 110]

Allah's other names can be used as words to describe others: words like *rahîm* (merciful), *samî`* (hearing), and *basîr* (seeing). About the Prophet (peace be upon him) Allah says: "With the believers he is gentle and merciful (*rahîm*)." [*Sûrah al-Tawbah*: 128]

Allah says: "Verily We created the human being from a drop of mingled sperm and made him hearing (*samî`*) and seeing (*basîr*)" [*Sûrah al-Insân*: 2]

These are different than Allah and al-Rahmân, names that can only be used for Allah.

Both the names al-Rahmân and al-Rahîm are derived from the Arabic word *rahmah*, meaning mercy. It has been advanced by some[7] that al-Rahmân denotes "general mercy for all of creation" while al-Rahîm denotes "specific mercy for the believers alone." Allah says: "And he is merciful (*rahîm*) to the believers." [*Sûrah al-Ahzâb*: 43]

Another opinion is that the difference between them is that al-Rahmân denotes the presence of the attribute of mercy, while al-Rahîm refers to the expression of Allah's Mercy and its affects on Creation. This is the opinion of Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him).[8] Based on this opinion, Allah is al-Rahmân and al-Rahîm with respect to both this world and the next.

We should take note of a subtle point regarding the repetition of these two names – al-Rahmân and al-Rahîm. A person who wishes to enter a room or depart from it, says: "In the name of Allah." A person begins to eat with the same words. If a person wants to speak or address someone, he or she begins by saying: "In the name of Allah." The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Any matter of importance that does not start with Allah's name is bereft of blessings. (In one narration of the *hadîth* it reads: "…with Allah's praise" instead of "…with Allah's name…")[9]

Nevertheless, it is well known that the wording used is: "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" (*Bismillâh al-Rahmân al-Rahîm*). No one has ever said: "In the name of Allah, the Severe in Punishment, the All Compelling" or "In the name of Allah, the Powerful, the Wise", though these are all truly names of Allah. This is indicative of the meaning expressed in the following *hadîth qudsî* that is related by al-Bukhârî where Allah says: "Verily my mercy supercedes my punishment."[10]

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[7] Abû `Alî al-Fârisî, al-Warmî, and others are of this opinion. Refer to the *tafsîrs* (Qur'anic commentaries) of al-Tabarî, al-Qurtubî, and Ibn Kathîr.
[8] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madârik al-Sâlikîn* 1/7 and thereafter.
[9] Ahmad (8300), Abû Dawûd (4840), Ibn Mâjah (1894). The same *hadîth* is related with a sound *mursal* chain from Zuhrî and with connected, but weak chains, from others. This is discussed in detail in the introduction of Subkî's *Tabaqât al-Shâfi`iyyah al-Kubrâ*. Refer also to the introduction of *Irwâ' al-`Alîl*.
[10] Bukhârî (6872, 6899, 6999) and Muslim (4939, 4941).

In another authentic *hadîth*, Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) says: "Allah's mercy has one hundred shares, only one of which He sent down to be shared by human beings, *jinn*, and all forms of animals. With this share of mercy, they are able to show affection and mercy to one another, and with it, a wild beast is able to show affection to its young. Allah has reserved the other ninety-nine shares for His servants on the Day of Resurrection."[11] This shows just how great His mercy is and how it comes before his anger.

This is why a person should never despair of Allah's mercy, no matter how great his sins may be. Allah says: "Say: O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of Allah's mercy, for Allah forgives all sins, and he is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." [*Sûrah al-Zumar*: 53]

Allah says: "And who despairs of his Lord's mercy save those who have gone astray?" {*Sûrah al-Hijr*: 56]

And He says: "No one despairs of Allah's mercy except those who are unbelievers." [*Sûrah Yûsuf*: 87]

For this reason, despairing of Allah's mercy and feeling secure from Allah's plan are among the characteristics of the hypocrites. This is also why a person should constantly and tenaciously ask for Allah's mercy. Moreover, he or she should instruct others about how to be confident about the mercy of their Lord.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) used to always teach his Companions to place their hopes in what is with Allah and to have more confidence in Allah and in His mercy than they have in their own good deeds. The reason for this is that their deeds might not be accepted. A person's good deeds might be tainted by the tendency to show off or by pride. They might be not be in accordance with the manner prescribed by Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) and for this reason be rejected. Instead, a servant must rely on Allah's mercy. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "No one's good deeds gets them into Paradise – not even my own, unless Allah covers me with His mercy."[12]

Therefore, all people – especially the sinners – should be invited to Allah by reminding them of His mercy as well as of His punishment. Allah says: "Tell my servants that I am indeed Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful and that my punishment is indeed painful." [*Sûrah al-Hijr*: 49-50]

People are in constant need of being reminded about Allah's mercy, especially since many people – including some students of knowledge and those who invite others to Islam – dwell so much on the threatening and fearful matters that their effect is the opposite of what they intended. The sinners consequently despair of Allah's mercy, and

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[11] Muslim (4944).
[12] Bukhârî (5637) and Muslim (2861) on the authority of Abû Hurayrah.

instead of reforming themselves, lose hope and persevere in their disobedience, falling ever deeper into sin.

On the other hand, inspiring hope in the hearts of the people is an important approach employed by the *Qur'ân*. We first encounter it at the very beginning of the *Qur'ân*, where it instructs us to begin in the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Even if a person wishes to speak about the fire of Hell, he must begin his speech by saying these words. Likewise, a person who wishes to speak about the causes of apostasy must do the same. If a person wishes to talk about Allah's prescribed punishments, he still begins by saying: "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful."

Therefore, these words should be given proper consideration when talking to the people. They should be reminded about how they should always remain connected with Allah, the Most Gracious and Most Merciful.

The names that form the basis for all of Allah's beautiful names are mentioned in this chapter: Allah – al-Rabb – and al-Rahmân. The name Allah implies all the attributes of His being the One True God; the name al-Rabb (the Lord) implies all the qualities of His Lordship, while the name al-Rahmân implies all of the qualities of His generosity, kindness, and beneficence towards humanity.

Allah's Lordship is from Him to His servants. His worship is from his servants to Him. And His mercy is the connection between them and their Lord. On account of His mercy, He sent His Messengers to humanity and revealed to them His books. Due to His providence, pardon, and the blessings He bestowed on them, they have every reason to worship Him, and between them exists the reason for mercy.[13]

? al-Mâlik (the Master)

This comes in His statement: "*Master of the Day of Judgment*." This is the day that people will be recompensed for their deeds. They will be requited for the good or the evil that they have done.

When reading this chapter of the *Qur'ân*, the servant first gives recognition to Allah, saying: "*Praise be to Allah*." Then he emphasizes and adds weight to this recognition by extolling Him with His names and attributes, saying: "*, the Lord of All the Worlds; The Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment.*"

Note: In one of the valid approaches to reciting the *Qur'ân*, the name al-Mâlik is read as al-Malik (with a short *a* as opposed to one which is drawn out in pronunciation). Both are equally acceptable recitations for use in the prescribed prayers.

[13] Introduction to *Madârij al-Salikîn*.

PART TWO
INVESTIGATING ALLAH'S STATEMENT:
"Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds; The Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment."

The chapter begins with praise, with the words: "*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds*." This is why this chapter is sometimes called *The Chapter of Praise*.

Praise is the act of commending the praiseworthy on account of his or her graciousness and acts of kindness. It is different than the act of extolling someone (*madh* in Arabic), since extolment is always done by mentioning the virtues, good characteristics, and beauty of the one being extolled.

Therefore, praising Allah entails lauding Him for the great blessings that he has bestowed upon you and the good that He has given you.

The sentence "So-and-so has praised so-and-so" means that some person has thanked someone else on account of some good thing that he or she has done for that person. On the other hand, the sentence: "He extolled him" does not imply that the one being extolled did anything good to the one who extolled him. He could be extolled on account of his eloquence, beauty, or strength.

Extolment (*madh*) is more general than the Arabic notion of praise (*hamd*), because it encompasses all types of good qualities. Praise, on the other hand, implies thanks and admission to someone else's beautiful conduct. Ibn al-Qayyim has observed another difference between the two. He says: "When one mentions the good qualities of another, this mention might be accompanied by love and affection for the one being talked about, or it might not be accompanied by such feelings. When it is not accompanied by the feelings of love and affection, it is extolment, and when it is accompanied by these feelings, and by a sense of aggrandizement and reverence, it is praise."

The chapter begins with the recognition of a great meaning – the servant's confession of his utter helplessness, dependency, and need, while recognizing the perfection, graciousness, and kindness of Allah. This is one of the greatest qualities of true worship, because a person might engage in worship in a misguided manner by becoming conceited on account of his own acts of devotion. Such worship will be rejected and come to naught due to conceit, which is contradictory to the recognition of Allah and humility before Him.

A servant cannot approach his Lord through a wider door than the door of humility. This is the very meaning exemplified by the words: "*You alone we worship*."

When the Arabs want to say: "The road is well worn by the feet passing over it", they use the word *mu`abbad* to describe it, a word implying submission and humility that comes from the same entomological root as the Arabic word for worship (*`ibâdah*). Thus,

humility before Allah is one of the most important concepts to be understood from the meaning of worship.

This is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) would often admit his deficiency, weakness, and iniquity before Allah. He used to say – and he instructed Abû Bakr to do the same – "O Allah, I have greatly wronged my own soul, and no one forgives sins except for You, so grant me Your forgiveness and have mercy upon me. Verily you are the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful."

He also used to say: "O Allah, you are my Lord. There is no God but You. You created me and I am your servant, and I abide by Your covenant and promise as much as I am able. I seek refuge with You from the evil that I do. I come back to You from Your grace upon me, and I come back to you with my sins. So forgive me, because none forgives sins except for You."

Even the phrase: "O Allah, forgive me" contains an admission of a person's sins and deficiency and recognition of the fact that Allah is Oft-Forgiving and Most Merciful.

The chapter begins with the words "*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds*" that contain within them recognition of Allah's great blessings. Without doubt, the opposite of such recognition is denial and ingratitude. The sin that turned Satan into an unbeliever was none other than this, since Satan knows who his Lord is and calls on Him by His name. He even swears by Allah, as can be seen in the following verse where Allah says about him: "He (Satan) said: 'Then – (I swear) by Your power – I will seduce them all'." [*Sûrah Sâd*: 82] Satan also petitions Allah and believes in the Day of Resurrection. The Qur'ân makes this clear: "(Satan) said: 'O my Lord! Grant me respite until the day that the dead are raised'." [*Sûrah Sâd*: 79] His sin, then, is his obstinate denial and his pride that keeps him away from obeying Allah and worshipping Him. Allah says the same thing about Pharaoh and his people: "And they rejected those signs in iniquity and arrogance, though their souls were convinced thereof." [*Sûrah al-Naml*: 14]

When a servant says: "*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the Worlds*", he absolves himself of all of this. It is as if he is saying: "I recognize that I am a servant in need. I am dependant, humble, and deficient, and you are Allah, my gracious and beneficent Lord". This encompasses the meaning of praise, because the servant praises his Lord on account of the gracious blessings that He has bestowed upon him in his faith and his worldly life.

PART THREE
INVESTIGATING ALLAH'S STATEMENT:
"You alone we worship and from You alone we seek help."

This verse expresses one of the greatest concepts in existence. It is recognition of subservience to Allah and that Allah is the focus of all worship. This is the foundation of monotheism. The Messengers were sent for no other reason but to convey this idea. Allah says that the message of the Prophets was: "…that you worship none but Allah." [*Sûrah Hûd*: 26]

Polytheism in worship is one of the most serious manifestations of polytheism. It is the bane of all nations. It has even found its way into Muslim societies, so much so that many Muslims can be found offering worship to other than Allah. This is why this form of polytheism is the most dangerous. The concept of Allah's absolute Lordship is part of a person's natural disposition. It is recognized instinctively by the human soul. Consequently, it does not need to be overemphasized. Some deviance does exist in understanding Allah's names and attributes, but it is nothing compared to the deviance that exists in offering worship to other than Allah. For this reason, calling people to the worship of Allah alone is of paramount importance. This concept is the foundation of the faith and the basis of monotheism.

Allah says: "*You alone we worship*." In this statement, the object of the verb precedes the verb. In Arabic, this conveys the meaning of exclusivity.

The statement: "…*and from You alone we seek help*" asserts that Allah is the only one Whose help should be sought. It is like saying: "We seek none other than Your assistance. We seek the help of no one else, we can never be independent of Your grace."

There are some people who seek help from other than Allah, and others who seek help from Allah and from others at the same time. Still, there are others who simply do not seek Allah's help at all. None of these people fulfill the requirements of the words: "…*and from You alone we seek help*."

This is why Allah says about this verse (as we have already seen in the hadîth qudsî): "This is between Me and My servant."[14] The statement "*You alone we worship*" shows the right of Allah over His servant. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Allah's right over His servants is that they worship Him and do not associate any partners with Him."[15] As for the statement: "…*and from You alone we seek help*", it shows the servants reliance upon Allah, since the servant has not even the ability to believe in Allah alone or to accomplish anything else, except with the help of Allah. For this reason, Allah has said: "The shall say: 'Praise be to Allah who has guided us to this, and we could never have been guided were it not for the guidance of Allah." [*Sûrah al-A`râf*: 43]

PART FOUR
INVESTIGATING ALLAH'S STATEMENT:
"Guide us to the straight way."

Our request for guidance has many meanings, among which are the following:

The first meaning: We are asking to be made steadfast on the straight way, so we will not deviate or stray from it. This is because it is possible for a person to be guided one day and become deviant on the next. Therefore, our request is immediately followed by the words: "…*The way of those on whom you have bestowed Your grace, not the way of*

[14] Muslim (598) as previously referred to.
[15] Bukhârî (2644, 5510, 5796) and Muslim (43, 45).

those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray." We are, then, asking Allah to make us steadfast on the path of those who receive His grace.

The second meaning: We are asking Allah to strengthen our level of guidance. Guidance has various degrees, and those who are guided are on different levels. Some reach the level of true piety (*al-siddîqiyyah* in Arabic) while others attain lower levels. The status a person will have in Paradise will be based on the level of that person's guidance in this world.

There are actually two "straight ways": one in this world, and one in the Hereafter. The one in the Hereafter is a bridge that must be traversed, and a person's success in crossing this bridge will be contingent on the how well that person adhered to the straight way during his or her life on Earth.

The worldly straight way is the way of Allah. It entails obeying His commandments and avoiding what He has prohibited. Allah says: "The way of Allah to whom belongs all things in the heavens and on Earth" [*Sûrah al-Shûrâ*: 53] and "So Allah may forgive you the faults of the past and those to follow, fulfill His favor to you, and guide you on the straight way." [*Sûrah al-Fath*: 2]

The servant will move across the bridge in the Hereafter in the same manner that he moved along the straight way in his worldly life. This bridge in the Hereafter is suspended over the Hellfire, and it is an untenable, slippery bridge. People will cross it according to their worldly deeds. Some will cross it at lightning speed. Some will move across it like the wind. Some will cross it at the speed of a good steed. Some will cross it as if on horseback. Some will go walking, and others will take faltering steps. Still others will be worse off.

So "*Guide us to the straight way*" means: "Strengthen us in guidance and increase our faith."

Allah instructs us, saying: "Say: 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge'." [*Sûrah TâHâ*: 114] Knowledge is from faith, and whenever our adherence to the straight way increases, our knowledge increases. Allah says: "As for those who believe, their faith is increased and they rejoice." [*Sûrah al-Tawbah*: 124] This increase in faith is in fact an increase in the adherence to the straight way. Allah makes it clear when he says: "And those who receive guidance, He increases in guidance." [*Sûrah Muhammad*: 17] Allah describes the inhabitants of the cave, saying: "Verily, they were youths who believed in their Lord, and We increased them in faith." [*Sûrah al-Kahf*: 13]

It is possible for a person to be rightly guided, yet still increase in insight, knowledge, and understanding. Such a person will consequently attain a higher level of devotion, patience, and other good qualities and then call others to the truth with greater vigor. All of this is implied in the statement: "*Guide us to the straight way*."

The third meaning: The straight way entails that the servant knows and does everything that Allah has commanded him to do at any given time while avoiding what Allah has prohibited. This requires constant awareness and action at all times, so that an ardent desire can be nurtured in the heart to do what Allah has commanded and a hatred can be fostered in the heart against doing what Allah has prohibited. This detailed knowledge and strong desire has to be maintained by Allah in the heart of the servant at all times, so that He or she can be guided to the straight way.[16]

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) says: "The servant is in constant need of guidance to deal with everything that comes his way: There are some matters that he has embarked upon without guidance, so he needs to repent from them. There are other matters where he possesses general guidance, but needs to be guided in the details. Then there are matters in which he has partial guidance wherein he needs to be guided completely. There are those matters that he had been guided about in the past, but will need similar guidance for them in the future. Still, there are those matters about which he possesses no belief whatsoever, so he needs to be guided about them from the start. There are deeds that he has not yet performed, so he needs to be guided to carry them out. There are those matters about which he already possesses proper beliefs and engages in correct actions, so he needs guidance so he may remain steadfast upon them. Beyond all of this, these are many other forms of guidance. Since the servant is in need of all of this, Allah has made it incumbent upon him to ask for guidance in his best circumstances, numerous times throughout morning and night."[17]

The nature of guidance:

The following are needed for the realization of guidance:

1. The ruling on the matter must be known; that is: what does Allah and His Messenger want from the servant on this matter?
2. The ruling must then be acted upon on the basis of strong faith in the heart that inspires the servant to act.

So, when the servant says: "*Guide us to the straight way*", he is calling out to his Lord, saying: "Our Lord, direct us to what you love and to what pleases you in everything that will confront us in our lives. Then strengthen us and assist us to act in accordance with what we have come to know because You have directed us to it and taught us."

All misguidance stems from one of two things: an absence of knowledge or the failure to act upon it.

The opposite of knowledge is ignorance. A person may have the desire to perform righteous deeds, but be ignorant of the Islamically correct way to go about it. He then follows a path of innovation on which he strives without benefit. How many are the Muslims who have fallen into all sorts of innovation and deviance while believing that

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[16] Majmû` al-Fatâwâ: 14/37.
[17] Ibn al-Qayyim, *Kitâb al-Salâh*.

they are conducting themselves in the best manner. The reason for this is lack of knowledge. So, when the servant says: "*Guide us to the straight way*", he is asking his Lord to instruct him and direct him so that he will not remain in misguided ignorance, stumbling about blindly.

Besides ignorance, there are vain desires. Knowledge may remove ignorance, but the person possessing knowledge may have no inclination to act according to it. He could purposely neglect his obligations or fall into forbidden acts, though he knows what the rulings are, because of his weak faith, his overriding passions, and his desire for immediate, worldly enjoyment.

So the servant must recite "*Guide us to the straight way*" in every unit of prayer. This shows us that the need for guidance is constant and enduring.

PART FIVE
INVESTIGATING ALLAH'S STATEMENT:
"The way of those on whom you have bestowed Your grace, not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray."

This verse emphasizes and adds detail to the meaning of the previous verse. Allah repeats that meaning here, because the *Qur'ân* employs a style of repetition. Allah says: "Allah has revealed the most beautiful speech; a book, consistent with itself, repeating its teachings" [*Sûrah al-Zumar*: 23]

Allah's statement: "*The way of those on whom you have bestowed Your grace*" refers to those who have attained complete guidance, by Allah's grace: from among the Prophets, the most pious who have earned the epithet of *siddîq*, the martyrs, and the righteous. These people are truly the best company.

He then says: "*… not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray.*"

? Those who earn Allah's anger

These are the people who know the truth but abandon it, including the Jews and others. Allah says: "Should I inform you of what is worse than that as a recompense from Allah? – Those who incurred the curse of Allah and His anger and of whom He made some into apes and swine, and the devotees of false gods. These are the worst in rank and the farthest astray." [*Sûrah al-Mâ'idah*: 60]

The Prophet (peace be upon him) has said: "The Jews are the ones who have earned Allah's anger and the Christians are the ones who are astray."[18]

This does not mean that Allah's anger is limited to the Jews, for Allah says: "If a man kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein, and the anger and curse of Allah are upon him." [*Sûrah al-Nisâ'*: 93]

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[18] Tirmidhî (2953) on the authority of `Adî b. Hâtim. Al-Tirmidhî grades it *hasan sahîh*.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "When someone who seizes the wealth of a Muslim by swearing a false oath meets Allah, Allah will be angry with him."[19]

In the story the Prophet (peace be upon him) related about the three people from the Children of Israel – the leper, the bald, and the blind: he said: "Verily Allah is pleased with you and angry with your two companions."[20]

This shows that Allah's anger is for the Jews as well as others. It is for those who were not guided to the straight way, not because of a lack of knowledge, but because of their vain desires. The Jews possess knowledge, but they did not act upon it.

Some of the pious predecessors have said: "The scholars of our people who go astray resemble the Jews." This is because they have knowledge, but commit errors intentionally and persistently. We should seek refuge with Allah from following their way and falling into their state. Part of being guided is to have a firm intention and a strong determination to do what is right and to abandon falsehood.

Allah mentions those who he is angry with before mentioning those who are astray, because their situation is far more serious and their sin far greater. A person who is astray out of ignorance can be set right by acquiring knowledge. If, however, that person is astray on account of his vain desires, then it is almost impossible for him to remove himself from error.

A person of knowledge who fails to act upon that knowledge actually possesses within himself all the proofs that could possibly be offered to him, therefore this person turns away when these proofs are presented to him.

For example, take a person who smokes. Because he smokes, he becomes concerned with the issue of smoking. He reads about it, and follows the news related to it. He learns about the serious dangers of smoking. He learns about what is contained within the cigarette that he smokes. He learns so much about smoking that he could actually present a very good lecture on the subject. In spite of all this, he continues to smoke. What can be done with this person? The issue at hand is not lack of knowledge. It is simply that this person does not want to give up smoking and has no intention of doing so. This is the most dangerous possible situation.

For this reason, the greatest threat looms over the one who does not act upon his knowledge. The Prophet (peace be upon him) has said: "A man will be brought on the Day of Resurrection and cast into the Hellfire. His haunches will be spilled into the fire and he will go around in it as a donkey goes around a mill. The inhabitants of Hell will gather around him and say: 'What is your story? Didn't you used to enjoin upon us what is right and forbid us from doing wrong?' He will reply: 'I used to enjoin upon you what is right but not do it myself and I used to forbid you from doing wrong and then engage

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[19] Bukhârî (7445).

[20] Bukhârî (3205) and Muslim (5265).

in it myself."[21] This man was knowledgeable. He knew right from wrong. Moreover, he would enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. But he did not act upon his knowledge, so he earned the punishment that he received.

One of the greatest manifestations of the disobedience of the Jews is that they know the truth but turn away from it and engage in falsehood. This is why Allah mentions those who earn His anger before mentioning those who are astray, saying: "*… not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray.*"

? Those who are astray

These are the people that abandon the truth out of ignorance, like the Christians and others. The Christians are astray out of ignorance. This does not mean that obstinacy and persistence did not subsequently develop within them after some of them overcame their ignorance.

? The three ways

We have before us three ways of proceeding. The first of these is the straight way, the way of those on whom Allah has bestowed His grace from among the Prophets, the most pious who have earned the epithet of *siddîq*, the martyrs, and the righteous. Their way is the way of true knowledge accompanied by correct actions. Allah says: "It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth." [*Sûrah al-Saff*: 9] By this He means beneficial knowledge and righteous deeds. This is the straight way.

The second way is the way of those who earn Allah's anger. This includes the Jews as well as others. They are the ones who know the truth but fail to act upon it.

The third way is the way of those who are astray. These are the people who act, but do so without knowledge. For this reason, some of the pious predecessors have said: "The worshippers among our people who go astray are like the Christians." The worshippers from among the Muslims who go astray – like the adherents of some Sufi orders who worship Allah in ignorance and in deviant ways – resemble the Christians, because they worship Allah in a manner that is misguided and devoid of knowledge.

This is the great meaning that is conveyed by the words: "*Guide us to the straight way, The way of those on whom you have bestowed Your grace.*" Though a Muslim has been guided to Islam, in spite of this, he must seek more guidance, which translates into more knowledge and more correct actions as well as divine assistance in everything that he must face in his life. Allah repeats this meaning, saying: "*…not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray.*" For the first group failed to act upon their knowledge and the second group failed to acquire it.

[21] Bukhârî (3027) and Muslim (5305).

CONCLUSION

I would like to finish off by asking Allah to make us among those who are guided to the straight way and to provide us with beneficial knowledge and bless us to perform righteous deeds. May he help us to avoid the way of those who earn his anger and the way of those who go astray.